

Study probes possible soil contamination sites

By Frank O'Donnell

A major effort to pinpoint sites of possible soil contamination at the Laboratory is getting under way.

The studies, designed to comply with requirements under the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Superfund program, will measure pollution that may have resulted from waste disposal practices that were common during the 1940s and 1950s when JPL was an Army laboratory.

Based on tests completed by the Laboratory last year, JPL officials believe it is likely the Laboratory will be named shortly to the EPA's National Priorities List, a roster of some 1,200 sites nationwide ranked as having the highest priority for remediation.

In the current studies, JPL is installing monitoring wells and conducting 30 to 40 sample borings to help engineers understand the sources of pollution affecting groundwater at the Laboratory.

"What we are trying to do is get a headstart on the process required by the EPA under the Superfund program," said Pam Cooley, an environmental engineer with JPL's Safety Office overseeing the cleanup studies.

After the current tests are completed, JPL will weigh various alternative solutions and propose a cleanup plan to the EPA as well as to state and local agencies involved.

Because JPL is on federal property, it is not eligible for EPA funding under the so-called Superfund — the common name for the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act of 1980.

The Lab's cleanup, rather, would be paid by its present federal sponsor, NASA.

As was common and accepted practice during the 1940s and 1950s, JPL disposed of wastes through cesspools. As sewers became accessible to the Lab in the late 1950s, JPL discontinued the use of cesspools.

Through the years, Lab policy and practices have continued to follow federal and state procedures for waste disposal as they became defined.

In 1986, Congress passed the Superfund Amendments and Reauthorization Act (SARA), requiring federal facilities to investigate past waste management at their sites.

To comply with that act, the Lab in 1990 conducted new studies including a site inspection and installation of five monitoring wells around JPL property.

Those studies uncovered several volatile organic compounds — trichloroethylene (TCE), perchloroethylene (PCE), carbon tetrachloride (CTC) and the chemical 1, 1-dichloroethene — at levels exceeding California drinking-water standards in at least one of the monitoring wells.

JPL forwarded those results to the EPA, which then scored the Laboratory on the environmental agency's Hazard Ranking System.

Based on knowledge of the ranking system, Cooley says the

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Lab is likely to be included on the next update of the EPA's National Priorities List, expected to be announced this year.

As part of the current work — known as a remedial investigation/feasibility study — JPL will consider alternative solutions and develop a cleanup plan to be proposed to the EPA, the Regional Water Quality Control Board and the California Department of Health Services. The current study will continue through about 1993.

After a cleanup design is approved and documented in what is known as a record of decision, work plans will be drawn up and cleanup will begin.

The type of cleanup is yet to be determined, and options may change as new technologies become available.

A key part of the current investigation is the search for specific sites on-Lab where solvents and other materials were disposed of in the pre-NASA era.

Cooley notes that her team has interviewed a number of JPL retirees and current employees who were at the Lab during that period, but are still looking for more who might remember where waste materials were handled or disposed of.

"Any help from employees of that era could help us save money today in designing our cleanup program," said Cooley.

Employees or retirees who might be able to help are encouraged to call Cooley at JPL's Safety Office on Ext. 4-4710.

In addition, employees who wish to keep informed on the pro-

gress of the studies and design of the cleanup are invited to place their names on a mailing list for updates.

Interested employees can drop a note to the Public Services Office at MS/180-205. □